



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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RARE BLACK-FOOTED FERRET FOUND IN WYOMING

A rare black-footed ferret, the only positively known living member of its species, has been captured alive in Wyoming and outfitted with a tiny radio transmitter so that Federal wildlife biologists can learn more about the habits of these secretive, nocturnal animals.

The ferret, captured October 29 by wildlife biologists of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is the first live black-footed ferret to be taken in the wild since 1973, in spite of intensive searches by Federal and State biologists in a number of western States.

"We are quite excited about finding this extremely rare, endangered mammal and having the opportunity to monitor its movements," said Eugene Hester, deputy director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "By studying this animal, we hope to obtain information that will help wildlife biologists bring this species back to healthy numbers."

The ferret, a male judged to be no more than 2 years old and weighing about two and one-quarter pounds, was spotted in a prairie dog colony by wildlife biologists who were looking for ferrets. They followed it to a hole where they succeeded in capturing it in a live-trap when it emerged several hours later. The biologists attached a small radio-transmitter to a collar placed around the ferret's neck, observed the animal overnight, and released it unharmed in the morning. The transmitter is expected to operate for 4 to 6 months, enabling biologists to gather information about such factors as the ferret's daily and

seasonal activity patterns, the amount of time it spends in burrows, its feeding activity, and whether it is nomadic. It is also hoped that the radio-tagged ferret may lead the biologists to other ferrets.

The exact location of the ferret's capture is being withheld to avoid disturbance to the landowners and to the scientific work. All of the work involving the ferret is being conducted under a Federal permit, which is required because the ferret is protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Considered by many wildlife biologists to be the most severely endangered mammal in the United States, the black-footed ferret is a weasel-like animal about 24 inches long with a black mask over its eyes, black feet, and a black-tipped tail.

In an attempt to increase the ferret's numbers, several ferrets were taken out of the wild between 1971 and 1973 for breeding in captivity at the Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. Although young ferrets were born, none survived, and the adults were found to have serious disease problems such as cancerous tumors and diabetes. The last captive ferret died in 1978.

In the meantime, efforts by Federal and State wildlife biologists using scent-trained dogs and other methods had failed to positively locate any additional live black-footed ferrets in the wild. The first real break in the ferret search came September 25, when a dead black-footed ferret was discovered in Wyoming.

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Editors: Black & white glossies of black-footed ferrets are available by calling 202/343-8770.